University of South Australia vice-chancellor Peter Hoj quits, goes to University of Queensland

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THE University of South Australia vice-chancellor has quit after failing to implement a merger of at least two of the state's universities.

Peter Hoj has accepted the top job at the University of Queensland.

The Danish-born professor, 55, will leave SA by November to become the vice-chancellor of Australia's fourth-ranked university - which has a $1.5 billion budget "almost the same as the three SA universities", he said.

"I was fully committed to a merger," Prof Hoj said.

"I've been very vocal on it and I clearly believe that none of the three SA universities have enough scale ... it will have to happen."

Leaders from the University of Adelaide and UniSA had been in merger talks for the past few months before the University of Adelaide abandoned the idea and elected to move ahead with appointing a new vice-chancellor.

The catalyst for talks - between the universities' chancellors, Adelaide's Robert Hill and UniSA's Ian Gould - was the movement of the Royal Adelaide Hospital to the city's West End, along with the then open vice-chancellor position.

Dr Gould has told UniSA staff that a global and national search has begun for a new vice-chancellor.

Prof Hoj, UniSA's vice-chancellor since 2007, said he had only engaged in talks with UQ this month to replace ousted University of Queensland vice-chancellor Paul Greenfield who, alongside his deputy Michael Keniger, became embroiled in a scandal for allowing a "close family relative" to be admitted to medical school without meeting all the requirements.

Prof Hoj departs UniSA with it in good shape, as it's the fastest-rising Australian university in the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) ranking scale.

The institution also has become known as a nursery for vice-chancellors, with former UniSA deputies Prof Caroline McMillen and Prof Peter Lee moving to head universities on the east coast over the past three years.

Prof Hoj, who has also served on the Australian Research Council and for seven years as chief of the Australian Wine Research Institute, and has two children studying PhDs at UniSA, said he would eventually return to live in Adelaide.

His appointment follows the ousting from the and his deputy, Michael Keniger, who became embroiled in a nepotism scandal for allowing a "close family relative" to be admitted to medical school without meeting all the requirements.

The CMC launched a criminal investigation into the affair and is expected to hand down its report in three weeks.

"I am looking forward to taking on the challenge," Prof Hoj said today in an exclusive interview.

Prof Hoj said he had not spoken to Prof Greenfield or Prof Henniger and had no idea what they were doing now.

"I only know what I read in the press," he said.

"I haven't made it my business to delve into any background that hasn't been made public."

He said the controversy was the "elephant in the room".

"Has the reputation of the university been tarnished?" he asked. "Time will tell."